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# **Talking English to Talk about Difference: Everyday Transcultural Meaning-Making in Naples Italy**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative empirical study explores the articulation of meanings about difference, belonging and positionality that are emerging in English talk across transcultural boundaries in Naples, southern Italy. It shows that the fraught encounters that take place on street markets, on public transport and at community events lead both to tactics of racialized closure, exclusion and division; as well as to the formation of innovative and ambivalent convivialities. In stressing the importance of talking English in intersubjective interactions it not only tells a story about the particular context and history of race relations in the city – where different sorts of speaking are central to a history of internal subordination and mass emigration – but also offers new ways of thinking about the complex and ambiguous multilingual reality that has resulted from intensified migration across the world.

## **Keywords**

migration, multiculture, multilingualism, Naples, racialization, Southern Italy

## **Introduction**

Scholars of everyday urban multicultural in English-speaking contexts have demonstrated the importance of language to the formation of transcultural convivialities and the negotiation of racialized struggles (Hewitt 1986; Sebba 1993; Smitherman 1977, 2006, 2007; Rampton 1997a, 1997b, 2003, 2010). This body of literature reveals a compendium of multilingual language practises that are being used across transcultural boundaries as part of an everyday co-habitation with difference. Glissant (1981, 1997) argued that frictions between multilingualism and monolingualism were the central dynamic emerging from the unequal transcultural encounters of Enlightenment modernity and colonial expansion. I contend that this is becoming even more significant in an age of mass migration, economic precariousness and global conflict. As such, this paper marks a call to make greater use of language as a tool for analysing questions of race and racism. It seeks to revive social-scientific discussions about local, lived experience and its connection to pressing social, political and economic realities in a way that is capable of attending to the global, multilingual reality.

This research contributes to knowledge about language use in multicultural and multilingual settings by focusing on everyday transcultural interaction in the city of Naples in southern Italy. Work on everyday multicultural in Naples has flourished over the last decade (Amato 2006, 2008, 2009; D'Alessandro 2008; Dines 2002; Sarnelli 2003; Schmoll 2003), although it does not make the connection between language, transculture and wider dynamics of race and power, as focused on here. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted with Neapolitan and migrant research participants in street corners, markets and public transport around Naples' central train station in Italy, Naples is shown to be somewhere with a particular history of

difference. Its record as an impoverished and racialized part of the Italian nation and site of mass emigration impacts upon the kinds of transcultural encounter that take place there in the age of globalized migration. At the same time, the city's problems of overcrowding, unemployment and underdevelopment can be argued to be not just a local particularity, but a common feature of our globalized and neoliberal age, connecting Naples to the vast swathes of the planet that have not benefitted so clearly from modernity (Chambers 2008, 111). Different forms of multilingual talk are an important optic both through which this history is worked through in Naples, and also through which new social changes are addressed and dealt with. In particular anxieties around speaking English – both for work in Italy and abroad and to demonstrate sophistication and status – are one of the clearest indicators of the ways in which multilingual and hierarchical “language attitudes” (Smitherman 1977, 190) – where English is at the top of the pyramid – articulate questions of cultural, economic and political dominance that are both locally particular and globally resonant. As such this article poses the question of how talking English in public spaces in Naples maintains, dismantles or produces racialized boundaries by thinking about how and in what context people talk English there, and also how they talk about talking English.

The paper is structured as follows. First I describe Naples' Enlightenment legacy in order to explain the socio-historic context within which contemporary race relations are negotiated. I then outline the key areas of literature and define the key concepts. Following this is an explanation of the methodology used to pay attention to English talk in the field. Then I demonstrate with ethnographic data how this plays out on the ground. Ethnographic vignettes are presented which show how English talk – talking English in particular situations and talk about talking English – features as a key way in which Neapolitans negotiate their own powerlessness and sense of

imposed inferiority, and interact with non-white but English-speaking migrants who have their own historical relationship with Europe and domination. The article concludes with a meditation on the import of multilingual transcultural encounters to knowledge about race, power, domination and its overcoming.

### **History and context: Naples' legacy of modernity**

Naples has been a semi-colonial territory since the twelfth century and largely governed through a “logic of colonial exploitation” by a series of rulers, starting with the Normans (Tarrow 1996, 394; Verdicchio 1997, 23). The history of Italian Unification – the period between 1780 and 1871 during which the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and its capital cities Naples and Palermo became part of an Italian nation – has been also described as a semi-colonial conquest, justified through pre-existing ideas about civilising the noble and violent southern savage, and carried out by the troops of the royalist Piedmontese state in the north (Gramsci 2010, 24; Gribaudi 1997, 88). In fact, the first Italian imperial forays into Africa began shortly after the annexation of southern Italy and the completion of unification in 1871. Italian unification and Italian imperialism appear as complementary parts of the same nationalist project (Del Boca 2005, 303-315; Gramsci 2010, 24; Verdicchio 1997, 22).

Unification was devastating for the south. Changes to customs and tax laws, and the failure to introduce effective farming reforms, caused the death of southern agriculture and resulted in a violently suppressed peasant revolt and mass emigration (Allum 1973, 21-2; Verdicchio 1997, 24). This deprivation came to be described by Italian politicians as “The Southern Question” from the early 1870s and, from the beginning, pre-existing tropes of southern racial and cultural inferiority were invoked to explain the causes of the problem (Schneider 1998, 10-11; Verdicchio 1997, 21-9). These tropes were then given scientific authority through the work of positivist

ethnologists like Alfredo Niceforo and Cesare Lombroso who measured southern Italian skulls and decreed that southerners were of African descent and less civilised than their Aryan neighbours (Schneider 1998, 11; Verdicchio 1997, 30). Discourses about southern Italian inferiority often focused on the question of language and the supposedly sensuous and primitive qualities of Neapolitan (Belmonte 1979, 5; Dickie 1999, 20). This was connected to the problematic lack of national sensibility and the fascist regime took a number of measures to form a unitary national language in the 1920s and 1930s (Tesi 2005, 199-201). So hierarchical “language attitudes” (Smitherman 1977, 199) have historically divided Italians along classed and racialized lines that mirror the forms of internal stratification and hierarchy that pre-date, but were cemented by, the Unification period and then fascism.

The Southern Question also needs to be considered as a historical construct of the South as it assumes a standard of Northern, Italian or European modernization and progress against which the South must be measured as inferior; and homogenises what is actually a much more complex picture of the Italian peninsula (Dickie 1999, 11-14; Gribaudi 1997, 83). This doesn’t mean that this story of impoverishment and subordination is not significant in people’s lives. Chambers has argued that in Naples it has been reworked into a “provincial rage” that explains the racist treatment of migrants by a people who, themselves, have experienced racism both from their co-nationals and as emigrants abroad (2008, 122). In truth southern Italian poverty is actually the result of wider global-historical processes of competition and domination. In the seventeenth century it was English mercantile hegemony in the Mediterranean that took trade away from the Port of Naples, and the US’ deployment of organised crime leaders within the police and judiciary to ensure stability in the wake of WW2 fixed Naples’ status (2008, 112-113). As Chambers states, this reading of Naples’

history connects it more explicitly to the wider history of Enlightenment modernity. Its problems of overcrowding, underdevelopment, unemployment and precariousness are not simply “local economic and cultural particularities” but, “a deep-seated inheritance that today would be considered part and parcel of the processes of ‘globalization’” (2008, 111). This reading of Naples’ history as framing a more global set of problems about difference, belonging and entitlement also foregrounds the dominant role that English language and culture have played in shaping these processes in Naples and elsewhere.

Mass emigration of the Southern Italian peasantry began in the wake of Unification. They moved predominantly to English-speaking countries where they struggled to learn the language and be accepted. Many were desperate to go home, but not because they had a strong sense of nationhood or loyalty to the state (Chambers 2008, 123-4; Gabbaccia 2003, 7). However, emigration usefully assisted Italian nation-building because it allowed the government to avoid dealing with the problem of unemployment (Signorelli 2006, 29-30). Twenty five million people left Italy between 1876 and 1976, and after 1900 Naples became the main port of departure (Chambers 2008, 124; Verdicchio 1997, 37). At least fifty per cent of these emigrants started returning from the 1930s onwards and, after WW2, a massive internal migration of southern Italians to the industrializing north started. Alongside the US Allied occupation, trans-oceanic migration has had a significant effect on Italian culture by promoting an admiration for American mass culture and way of life (Signorelli 2006, 55). However, Signorelli has argued that the traumatic memory of the experience of emigration itself has been systematically erased both by the returnee migrants and the many Italians who have relatives who emigrated (2006 28-31).

Emigration continues to be a feature of Italian life, although the new generation of emigrants are able to travel back and forth more easily which makes the experience more temporary and eases the difficulties of maintaining family and cultural ties (Signorelli 2006, 32). If Italy has become a country of immigration over the last three decades, it is still very much a country of emigration, particularly from the impoverished South, as predominantly highly-educated young Italians leave their home regions to seek employment in northern Italy and abroad (Pugliese 2002, pp.141, 151-156). Data from 2014 shows that the number of Italians living abroad grew by 155,000 whilst the number of migrants residing in Italy grew by 92,000. The total number of Italians residing abroad was a little over 4.6 million and the total number of foreigners (EU and non EU) residing in Italy was about 5 million (Letizia 2014).

Increased immigration to Italy from outside of the European Union reflects the fact that Italy came to share, although belatedly in comparison, many common features with the other receiving countries across Europe – such as economic prosperity, partial state welfare provision and a relative salary structure (Colombo and Sciortino 2004, 15). Data from 2015 suggests that the non-EU migrant population in Italy was about 3.9 million with the largest groups being Albanian, Chinese, Moroccan, Romanian, Phillipino and Ukrainian nationals (Istat 2015). The highly diverse, uneven gendering and politicized nature of contemporary migratory flows present a similar picture to that seen across Europe and reflect the fact that migration from formerly colonial territories has been replaced by a “globalisation of migration” (Colombo and Sciortino, 21-40; Phizacklea 2003, 23).

Despite a history of sending emigrants abroad, and a stereotypical reputation for being kind and hospitable (Del Boca 2005, 47; Niola 2006, 30), Neapolitans have



experienced considerable difficulty in welcoming newcomers in their midst (Signorelli 2006, 204-8; Chambers 2008, 126). At the same time this account of a defensive and xenophobic cultural identity has been offset by the popular axiom of Naples city being, at any rate, more welcoming or less racist than other parts of the region and the country (Amato 2009, 244; Rea 2006, 14). The ambiguous nature of the welcome received by migrants might be further understood by outlining something of how the Neapolitan poor negotiate unemployment, precariousness and access to resources in their daily lives. Naples' informal or "slum" economy, by which capital from various legal, semi-legal and illegal sources passes from hand to hand within the closed streets of the community, is vital for survival there. Participation in the slum economy has always been viewed in Naples, with pride, as an *arte di arrangiarsi* (an art of getting by) that mitigates mass unemployment (Allum 1973, 40; Pardo 1996, 11). Migrants, in a similarly precarious economic position, are often seen as a threat to competition and scares resources. But, the contribution that migrants make to the slum economy is also frequently described approvingly by Neapolitans as them also knowing how to *arrangiare* or get by (Dines 2002, 178). As such, the informal economy generates important sites for the exercise of transcultural collaboration and conviviality.

### **Conceptualising language in multicultural Naples**

This study was inspired by previous work in English-speaking countries about the relationship between language and racialized struggles in ethnically diverse urban settings. Work by Hewitt looks at the use of Jamaican patois by black and white young people in South London as a "formulaic corpus" which can be drawn on to "transpose struggles over power into struggles within signification" that contain alternative possibilities for togetherness (1986, 8, 98, 205, 235). Other work in this

area suggests that switching between languages is a form of resistance against institutional oppression (Gilroy and Lawrence 1988, 132-140; Sebba 1993) or constitutes “acts of identity” whereby claims about ethnicity are linked to linguistic questions and can draw communities closer together (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). More recently, Rampton (1997a, 1997b, 2003, 2010) and Harris (2003) have argued that new ethnic identities and a sense of “liminality” are creating innovative “language-crossing” practices that challenge dominant views about insiders and outsiders. Smitherman’s work on speech play in African American English contends that humorous language can be used as a form of stress release and social commentary amongst subaltern people (1977, 2006, 2007). She also introduces the idea of hierarchical “language attitudes” which allow dominant groups of people to use language as a tool of oppression against the powerless (1977, 199). Given the attitudes associated with different languages in the Neapolitan context, this literature has been useful in helping me to conceptualise the use of language as part of racialized struggles there.

Work on race, migration and multiculturalism in Italy and Naples has started to emerge over the last decade, although Curcio and Mellino (2010) and Proglino (2013) have critiqued the tardy arrival of these discussions in both scholarship and the public sphere. A number of scholars have proposed frameworks for positioning contemporary race relations in Italy within the history of European Enlightenment, territorial expansion and fascism: Chambers presents Naples as porous – soaking up cultural influences through both trade and conquest – and having developed a fraught relationship with modernity and defensive regional culture due to its subordinated status within Italy and the “West” (2008, 80-83). Signorelli’s (2006) work explores the history of Italian emigration in connection to contemporary immigration to Italy, a

linkage she says is not often made by scholars wishing to look at migration to Italy as an entirely new phenomenon. She argues that it is important to draw out the commonalities and distinctions in these experiences of movement in order to think about what how this impacts upon communities today. Meanwhile, Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop (2013) have argued that the fascist period was marked by a different approach to conceptualising race in the Italian peninsula. Using an intersectional analysis, they write that during this period Italians were taught to define their own whiteness in relation to the black colonised Other and to ideas of blackness wrought by US mass culture, and not in relation to their own internal differences.

Qualitative and quantitative empirical work on race, spatial practices and the lived experience of difference in particular parts of Naples has emerged from the work of the urban geographers Amato (2006, 2008, 2009), D'Alessandro (2008), Dines (2002), Sarnelli (2003), and Schmoll (2003). This work points towards particular spaces of urban encounter that inform interaction and collaboration between Neapolitans and migrants. It shows that many migrants work alongside unemployed and underemployed Neapolitans in the vast informal sector that keeps the city afloat and this leads to forms of transcultural collaboration; although migrants do still take the most marginalised positions within that economy. Some of this work also explores the effect that migration has had on speaking practices and language attitudes over the last couple of decades, particularly in public spaces and street market contexts. Dines' work on multicultural street markets in Piazza Garibaldi, Naples, argues that multilingual proficiency is central to the successful conduct of business in street markets that often have a foreign clientele (2002, 184). Sarnelli's work (2003) examines the use verbal and non-verbal joking between Neapolitan and Senegalese street traders and suggests that these interactions are deeply ambiguous, both opening

up the possibility of multi-ethnic cooperation and friendship whilst acting as displays of power and dominance. I argue that this body of work on multiculturalism in Italy can be amplified and developed by centralising the connection between localized manifestations of multilingual, transcultural interaction and wider issues of solidarity, resistance and power.

Conceptually, I have been influenced by Glissant's argument that transcultural interaction and meaning-making, what he calls "Relation", is guided by a fraught, linguistic principle (Glissant 1981, 793-6, 1997, 107). This way of thinking about culture and language became familiar following the "discursive turn" in the social sciences. In particular Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha asked that attention be drawn to language in order to understand diverse and conflicting productions of cultural meaning-making around questions of race and racism (Bhabha 1990; Drew and Hall 1999). Attention to culture, meaning and language is important because of the vital way they constitute economic, political and material formations (Drew and Hall 1998, 222-225). Glissant's (1981, 1997) conceptualisation of multilingualism as the central outcome of the unequal transcultural encounters of modernity proposes the multilingual as a liberating "counterpoetics" to forces of exclusion and subordination, which he describes as monolingual. The connection between multilingual language practices and the economic, political and material is important to an understanding of the contemporary global reality characterised by superdiversity and unequal conditions of labour. Voloshinov's (1986) and Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) philosophy of language, which seeks to define the ways in which intersubjective dialogical utterances can inform ambivalent and multiaccentual ideological change, has also helped me to pay attention to the multilingual dynamics of the transcultural encounters I was part of. In particular Bakhtin's (1986) notion of "speech genres" –

the “typical situations” and “typical themes” of speech communities – has assisted me in connecting particular talking practices to questions of material struggle.

### **Methods: managing the multilingual in the field**

Ethnographic methods were used to pay attention to the ways that talk relates to transcultural meaning-making in Naples. The fieldwork was conducted over the course of nine months with time being spent on street market stalls, public transport and at community events in and around the main train station in Naples. This area, sometimes known as *La Ferrovia* (The Railway), is a nodal transport point and also witnesses the city’s most intense economic activity, in the form of markets, stock warehouses and hotels. These characteristics have been transformed dramatically by migration and settlement over the last two decades and there is significant economic cooperation and an everyday vivacious and open sociability between Neapolitans and migrants there (D’Alessandro 2008; Dines 2002; Rea 2006, 6-9; Schmoll 2003, 306).

Contacts in the Naples’ antiracist scene introduced me to the neighbourhood and the street vendors whose stalls provided a key place from which to gather data. I spent time in two licensed markets: Via Bologna Market (a street market made up of about eighty pitches run by mostly West African traders selling Wax cloth, accessories and toiletries to fellow migrants), and Poggioreale Market (an open-air shopping centre where mostly Neapolitan traders sell designer, Made in Italy bags, shoes and accessories in bulk to some Italian but mostly foreign buyers from West Africa). I also worked with two Senegalese street vendors selling bags and hats from unlicensed pitches along one of the main shopping streets in the city.

Participant observation was the principal method used during fieldwork. I used audio recording on the market stalls and, where possible, at community events, because my interest in language meant I wanted to pay attention to the exact wording

of what was said. It was not possible to make recordings whilst travelling around the city on buses and trains, although data gathered during these journeys came to be of increasing importance due to the open and sociable encounters that take place there. Instead, I wrote up fieldwork notes immediately after leaving the field.

In the process of writing this thesis I have translated the dialogues and notes I recorded into English. I have not sought to hide the nuts and bolts of this process but, instead, the dialogue is coded in the text to give an idea of the multilingual chatter of the field: anything that was said in Neapolitan is in italics, anything said in Italian is in normal type and anything that has been transcribed directly without being translated is underlined. This has been done in an effort to show how language difference and processes of translation, interpretation and representation are a fundamental part of academic knowledge production (Do Mar Pereira et al. 2009, 1-2; Temple 2004).

When analysing the data, I paid attention to particular types of talk, like swearing, greetings, and switching between languages. I analysed this “dialogically”, paying close attention to how language use amongst my research participants produced meaning through interaction and negotiation. Over the course of collecting, organising and going through the data, I began to define a series of speech genres (Bakhtin 1984, 1986), or conventions of speaking, through which ideas about difference, belonging and positionality were being worked out in my field sites. These genres interconnected at various moments and included forms of multilingualism (talking English, Neapolitan or Italian), gendered banter in public spaces, market haggling, and political language. These patterns of communication, and their relationship to a wider terrain of economic and political struggle, began to tell a story

about the bigger issues at stake in the enactment of a daily multilingual Relation in Naples' markets.

Talking English emerged as one key speech genre and data related to this has been used in this article. I found that there was a running preoccupation with talking English throughout the time I spent in the field. There were certainly practical reasons for this as English often worked as a *lingua franca* enabling Italians to communicate with migrants from Africa or South Asia who spoke English because of their countries' legacy of colonial rule. In Poggioreale Market, English was the principle language of communication between vendors and their West-African clients who came specifically to Naples to bulk-buy leather goods. Large amounts of money were exchanging hands and this created tension on both sides regarding communication difficulties. Talking English was also connected emotionally to histories of emigration to English-speaking countries and the allure of US mass culture. Many of the people who figured in my research recognised emigration as part of their collective heritage and contemporary reality. The ambivalent bitterness and glamour associated with having to switch into English seemed to raise intriguing connections between histories of Italian emigration and the waves of migration to Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

My own positionality, as someone of Italian and British heritage who speaks English, Italian and Neapolitan fluently, had a significant effect on the importance that talking English came to play in the project. My mother's family is from the area where the research was conducted and I have strong ties there. Not only did the subject of talking English come up more readily because I represented in some ways the figure of both the English-speaking foreigner and the returnee emigrant; But I was also occasionally called upon for my language skills, as an interpreter figure at the markets I researched.

## Talking English

### *Talking English with the English*

It was May and I had been spending time with family on the coast. I caught the Circumvesuviana train back into the city and I ended up sitting opposite a young British couple with large backpacks. The train was crowded with commuters and tourists and many people had to stand in the aisles. At one stop a group of three young Roma men got on holding instruments. Two played folk instruments whilst the third man began to sing a series of Neapolitan pop songs in time with the music<sup>i</sup>. The young man's voice was so spectacular that everybody sat up to listen. A Neapolitan man asked the British couple, in English:

**Neapolitan Man:** Do you like the song?

**British Man:** Very much (his girlfriend nods enthusiastically).

**Neapolitan Man:** (shaking his head dismissively) But they are not Italian.

**British man:** (surprised) They aren't?

**Neapolitan Man:** They are Romanian.

**British Woman:** (leaning in to male companion) Where did he say they're from?

**British Man:** Romania.

**British Woman:** Oh!

**Neapolitan Man:** They are Romanian, Ukrainian, I don't know!

The Roma man stopped singing and started making his way down the crowded carriage holding out a plastic cup and saying, "Thanks... some change please... many thanks!" His spoken Italian, just like his sung Neapolitan, appeared native to me.

**Neapolitan man:** (to British man) Tomorrow I go to London to see football:

Napoli – Chelsea!

**British Man:** Oh, I'm sure Napoli will win!



**Neapolitan Man:** I... how do you say? I pray! (British man laughs) I lived in England for two years. In Leicester.

**British Man:** Oh – I'm from Leicester!

The episode did a lot of work in depicting the relationship between language and hierarchical forms of difference in Naples. Despite his perfect Italian and dialect the young Roma man could not be Italian or Neapolitan. This refusal to understand his spoken Italian or Neapolitan as *making him* Italian or Neapolitan is part of a politics of recognition that refuses to integrate migrants, and particularly members of the Roma communities who are subjected to significant racism in Naples<sup>ii</sup>, into the collective local or national identity. Furthermore the Neapolitan man felt compelled to correct what he perceived as the mistaken assumption of the tourists that he might share any sort of kinship with the singer. In speaking English to the young tourists, he positioned himself as an erstwhile migrant and one-time Other on British soil. He spoke an imperfect and accented English to them as part of a tactic to demand recognition as one of them: European and entitled to occupy the space as opposed to a despised, not-quite-white, vaguely Eastern European Other. This slotted into an ideological hierarchy of European belonging that was revelatory of southern Italy's precarious positionality on the racialized edge of Europe.

### ***Talking English at work***

Over the years market traders in Naples have learnt to barter in a number of different languages although now, after thirty years of mass migration, different variations of the local market patois of Italianized-Neapolitan or Neapolitanized-Italian are mostly sufficient for the conduct of trade, alongside the occasional bits of English and French. However, given the particular composition of the buyers going to Poggioreale market, where people flew in from Europe and West Africa specifically to buy items

for shops before taking them back home, the vendors there had to be proficient in English. Here, English was the dominant language of barter with foreign clients and these transcultural encounters could cause miscomprehensions and distrust as much as communicative skill and zeal.

The following episode of barter in English involved one of my Neapolitan research participants, Peppe, and Ade, Nigerian man who had come to Poggioreale market to buy bags for a boutique back home:

**Peppe: (to me)** do you understand? Or can't you pick up anything?

**Me:** They're comparing things, like colour and material... thinking about what would sell well.

**Peppe:** Tell them those bags cost loads of money –

**Me:** Yes and you bought them at stock price –

**Peppe:** For their benefit.

**Me: (to Ade)** Ok so he's he's saying that this bag originally was very expensive but they buy it from the factory, create a stock and sell it at a lower price so the quality is very good and the price is very good.

**Ade:** So what is he saying actually?

**Me:** Sorry?

**Ade:** What's he saying?

**Me:** That's honestly what he's saying. Look: this is the original price... because what they do is they buy – I can't remember what the word is – they buy...

**Ade:** In quantity?

**Me:** Yeah. They buy in large quantity to give you a good price. You come to Poggioreale because everything has been bought directly from the factory so it's a good quality bag at a good price

Once they had selected the bags the actual negotiations started:

**Peppe:** This: forty, forty, forty, thirty and thirty (**indicating all the bags**). One hundred and eighty!

**Ade:** One, two three...

**Me:** Three at forty...

**Ade's sister:** Check how many are forty! These two thirty thirty... he can't give you good price?

**Peppe:** No. finito! (**crosses open palms under each other and flicks them both outwards to indicate 'no'**) This is the best price!

**Ade:** No no no no: customer (**gestures to himself**) me: talk to me. I'm your customer.

**Peppe:** No, no: finito. If you want: one hundred and eighty. One hundred and eighty. Finito.

**Ade:** customer, customer...

**Peppe:** No, no... One hundred and eighty. (**They eventually agree on this price**).

As an expert English speaker, my presence at Poggioreale significantly impacted upon the interactions that took place between the vendors and their customers. This often positioned me ambivalently in relation to both my research participants and their clients, revealing the “zone of uncertainty” often occupied by interpreters (Inghilleri, 2005). When I was placed in the middle of bartering processes both sides questioned me closely, unsure whose side I was on. I found myself in an awkward position as I was aware of the ways in which I was influencing the sale and, often, endorsing the point of view of the Neapolitan vendors by embellishing the things they were asking me to translate. What made things worse was that I clearly wasn't able to

mediate the deep currents of transcultural tension and distrust that these processes of barter evoked.

The vendors at Poggioreale were dependent on their African clients. The art of getting by through trade in retail – and the imperatives of a trade that had to be conducted in English – created cultural and linguistic interdependencies that rubbed uncomfortably alongside national and local meanings about race, difference and belonging. This was particularly powerful because, instead of seeking work from Italian employers – and obviously then contributing to the economy through tax and consumption – the migrant buyers at Poggioreale created economic opportunities *for* Italians, in contrast with anti-immigrant politics and sentiment.

### **Talk about talking English**

Another key way in which talking English presented itself as a key speech genre through which everyday difference was negotiated was through discussion about the practical necessity of being able to talk the language. The following encounter took place between the Neapolitan owners of a grocery store selling West African food and myself. This ethnographic excerpt has been translated from Italian:

**Me:** Is the meat halal?

**Man:** Erm?

**Me:** I mean – can Muslims eat it?

**Man:** Oh yes! Are you Italian?

**Me:** My mum is from near here. I grew up in England though. I'm here studying and teaching English classes.

**Woman:** Oh well, we all need English lessons – us and the Africans! **(laughter)**

**Man:** I married a foreign woman too. I lived in Brasil for three years and I married my wife there and had a daughter. She hasn't learnt Portuguese but can speak Neapolitan.

**Me:** Are you pleased about that?

**Man:** Yeah – I think that's how it should be, you know? She's living here and all that.

Here, talk about the need to learn English appeared at the top of a hierarchy of “language attitudes” (Smitherman 1977, 199) in a way that made an ambivalent convivial connection between them and their African migrant clients. The woman's joking comment shone a light on the difficult economic reality in Naples and spoke to insecurities about Neapolitan cultural and linguistic inferiority. At the same time, in the man's comments, talking English was counterposed with an acceptance and celebration of the hybrid cultural and linguistic encounters of globalized multiculturalism which all three of us were imbricated in. As such, the exclusionary monolingualism represented by the importance of talking English was counterposed with a multilingual counterpoetic and celebration of difference (Glissant 1981, 1997).

Some of the Italian market vendors I worked with negotiated this need to speak English with confidence and enjoyment. When I first met Mario and Pina, who ran a leatherwear stall at Poggioreale market, they exclaimed that it was great I spoke English as I could help them negotiate with all their English-speaking clients. Then they jokingly told me that I wouldn't be much good as I myself would need to learn what they called the “dialects” of English that their African clients really spoke. They told me that when clients asked how much a bag cost, they knew to pronounce the “thirty” of “thirty four euro” as “terty”, without the “th” sound that they knew to be the standard British pronunciation.

Other vendors found bartering in English more stressful. Peppe (from the last section) did not find negotiations with foreign clients at Poggioreale market so easy. He employed English-speaking help on his stall but often lost his temper when those employees didn't respond quickly enough or correctly understand his Italian instructions. Often I would see him or his son aggressively shout "when are you going to learn some Italian?!". The following is a conversation between Peppe and I just after another large sale of bags. Like before, the dialogue has been translation from Italian and also Neapolitan (in italics):

**Me:** Is it stressful to haggle with Africans then?

**Peppe:** Well you know...

**Me:** Is it the language thing or their methods, or both?

**Peppe:** No it's because they're much more... For me it's about something else.

**Me:** Well I guess you're used to it by now.

**Peppe:** You should see what they do! They buy thirty bags and then another one of them will want the bags and then it's all "No I got them!" Anyway... then you put them to one side and tot up the bill and then it's all "wait a minute!" And then they pick one bag up and remove another and in the end they don't want any of them and they've convinced someone else to buy them. Then, sometimes we take the sold bags straight to the hotel. When we get there, out of thirty to fifty bags – all made of leather that you have sold and brought all the way there – all of a sudden they try to return thirty of them....

You know the language thing is so important for us though...

**Me:** The fact that you need it to work?

**Peppe:** No I mean the fact of having to communicate with them... We get angry because... well... my son knows a thing or two but not much really... *you get me?*  
*What can you do?*

**Me:** I understand. Everyone who comes to buy speaks English or French.

**Peppe:** Yeah... but you know: there's also quite a few of them that know a bit of Italian. Quite a few... I just wish I was twenty years younger so I could go off and learn English. You know it's always been like this... that English has been spoken here... we knew we should get studying English. But in our day our parents, well, we just didn't go to school. My son also didn't want to do any type of studying and he's raising his own son this way as well, because my grandson doesn't want to study. It's always a cause of big arguments.

Talk about talking English re-awakened latent memories of emigration and foreign influence in Naples, as well as encapsulating the stress of participation in the global economy. As such it was an extremely potent indicator of the way Naples' past collided with its present, revealing the ideological struggle inherent in the use and meaning of language (Bakhtin 1981, 1984; Voloshinov 1986). The complicated feelings expressed by vendors at Poggioreale market about needing to talk English to their African clients also revealed the contingent and uneven workings of power and appropriation. The importance of their African buyers disrupted established racialized scripts and hierarchies about getting by and economic cooperation in the city. People were positioned in different ways according to ambivalent and shifting hierarchies of wealth and status. Comic language could temporarily suspend those hierarchies, as Pina and Mario's joking comparison between Nigerian English and Standard English did, and allow new horizontal conceptions of diversity to appear. But this could often descend into abusive and oppressive language, as with Peppe and his son and the way

in which they treated their foreign staff. Their linguistic frustration about talking English uncovered anxieties about their own classed, racialized and gendered subordination within the global economy and the uncomfortable commonalities they held with the other Others in their midst.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that talking English in Naples allows for a tireless interactive and reciprocal dialogism that can both renew or destroy the Relation between people (Glissant 1981, 627-8, 1997, 25). The ethnographic data shows that English talk in Naples connects to a legacy of European expansion and domination that troubles claims about biological and cultural categories of racial superiority and complicates interaction with migrant newcomers in the age of migration. The people I encountered in my research often did not have full mastery over the English they spoke with each other. They were always translating and their daily linguistic toil was frequently difficult and incomplete. And yet communication was nearly always successful, even if it could shift between a transcultural positive and negative. Daily, mundane transcultural meaning-making is fraught and dislocating. But there is also a refreshing and playful openness to linguistic confusion and uncertainty showing how the hybrid Counterpoetics of Relation work alongside and counteract the exclusionary logics of essentialist politics and Fortress Europe.

Attention to multilingualism and English talk in Naples builds upon the literature about everyday multiculturalism in Naples to foreground language as the key connective tissue between a history of imposed inferiority and material struggle and contemporary race relations in the city. Talking English represents a pragmatic choice to do with surviving economic and political precariousness. But it is also more than this. I follow Glissant's (1991, 1997) argument that these practices represent an



ideological pulsation towards a constantly shifting unity-in-difference. People make new and transformative cultural meanings about belonging, difference and positionality simply by living with the unstable multiplicity of difference. This has important implications for understanding the future stakes of race and racism, both in Naples and elsewhere. It suggests that the global movement of people creates a mobile multilingualism in all those locations where transcultural encounters occur, and the result is not chaos but an ever-changing and interactive amalgamation of difference. This multilingual counterpoetics is not something that institutions and governments can do much to either encourage or repress, despite the frequent stated intentions to do so. We can no more stop the multilingual babel of late capitalism than we can prevent the actions and movement of people looking for choice and opportunities. The cultural languages of the people signify the power of their collective drive.

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<sup>i</sup> Unlicensed busking is a key money-making tactic for the Roma, particularly in Naples, where they manage to carry out their performances without too much official trouble. They usually play traditional songs and combine singing with folk instruments, West African percussive instruments and sometimes dancing. People do give money, even though they complain about the practice.

<sup>ii</sup> For example the pogroms of the Roma camp in Ponticelli, Naples, in 2008 and in the Poggioreale neighbourhood of the city in March 2014 (Cronache di Ordinario Razzismo 2014). In 2013 an unknown person threw acid down onto a Roma child from a balcony in the Fuorigrotta neighbourhood (Mazzone 2013).

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